

A sporting chance

How can Canadian manufacturers survive in a ruthlessly low-cost world? The sports industry shows that a high-quality niche is not just defensible—it's exportable

By John Lorinc • Photographs by Jesse Boles



SEAWARD KAYAKS MANUFACTURING LTD.
Chemainus, B.C.

This 24-year-old Vancouver Island creator of handmade kayaks has an international reputation among outfitters and outdoor schools. “We’re known as the Rolls-Royce in the kayak world,” boasts Seaward’s sales and marketing manager, Glenn Lush. The company began by supplying outfitters and then branched out into retail markets in the early 1990s; it now sells worldwide. Seaward distinguishes itself from larger competitors with its small scale of production (the employee head count is just 20), and by its use of state-of-the-art materials, such as thermoformed plastic that is easier to apply than fibreglass.



ARC'TERYX EQUIPMENT INC.
North Vancouver

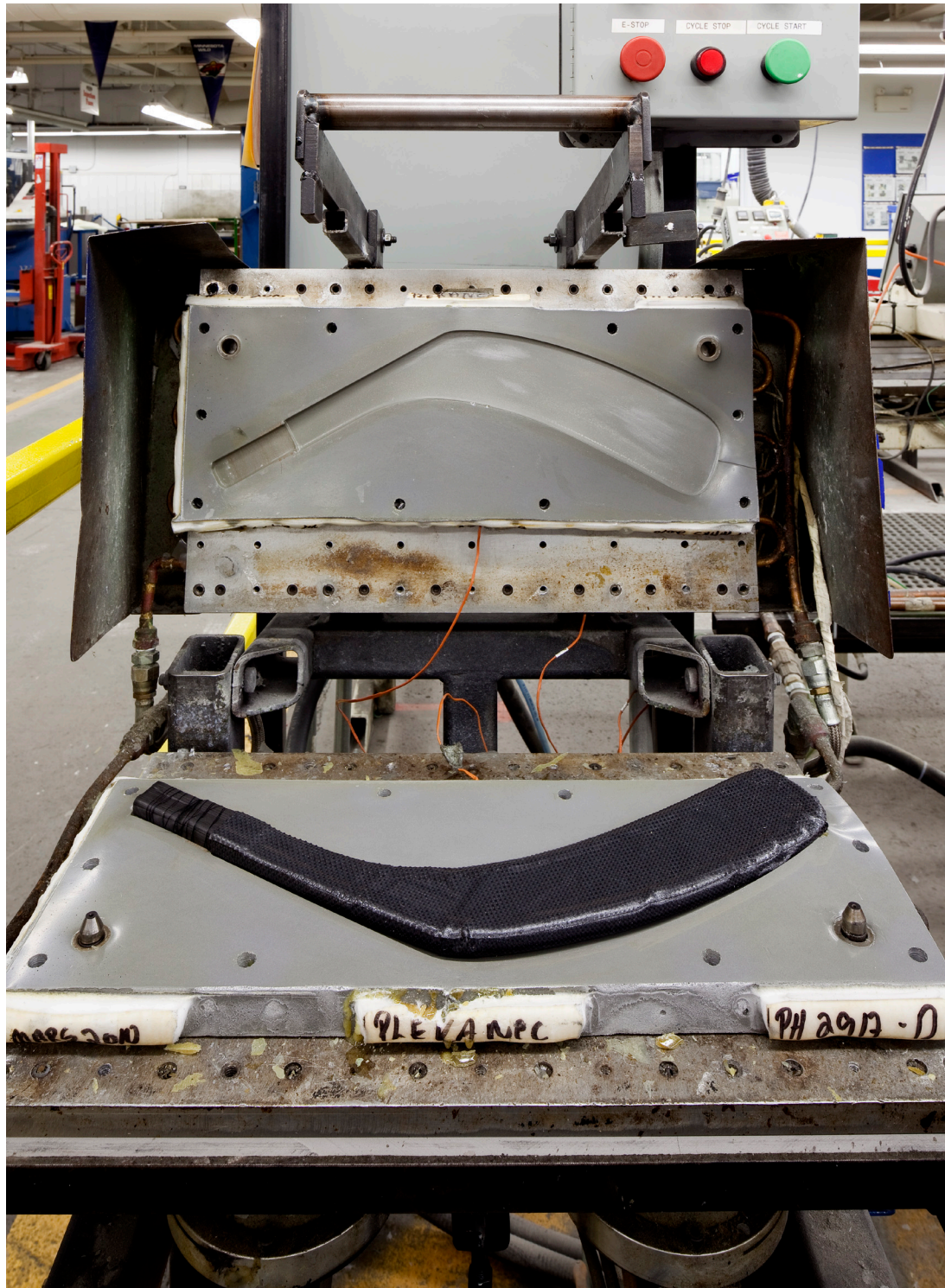
In the early 1990s, climbers Dave Lane and Jeremy Guard turned the mountaineering equipment industry on its head by figuring out how to use thermoforming technology to create climbing harnesses and innovative knapsacks with moulded back panels. Arc'teryx has continued to employ emerging fabrics and materials on a broad range of outerwear and gear. “The technology that goes into the materials these days is incredible,” says director of brand marketing Tom Duguid. With 430 employees and annual revenues of \$120 million, the firm sells into North America, Europe and the Pacific Rim. Until 2005, Arc'teryx did all its manufacturing at its North Van factory. But growth forced the firm to hire offshore manufacturers, leaving the original plant to carry on as a kind of R&D operation.



ROCKY MOUNTAIN BICYCLES

Delta, B.C.

Long before Cervélo became eponymous with Canadian-made high-performance bikes, there was Rocky Mountain. The firm was one of a handful of manufacturers that revolutionized the cycling industry with high-end off-road bikes. Over the last decade, however, Rocky Mountain has had to adapt itself to the surging popularity of lightweight carbon frames. The firm, which was purchased by Procycle Group Inc. in 1997, now outsources frame manufacturing to Asia, but handles assembly and R&D, as well as short runs, in Delta. Annual revenue is north of \$40 million, and markets span 30 countries, including a particularly strong position in Europe.



SHER-WOOD HOCKEY INC.
Sherbrooke, Quebec

In the hockey stick business, carbon is in and wood is out. Sher-Wood, Quebec's legendary hockey stick manufacturer, did not lead this abrupt transformation of the market. But the 61-year-old brand is aiming to re-establish its dominance with an engineering innovation designed to reduce the vibration associated with the carbon marvels. Last fall, the 170-employee company, once lauded for making what Hab's legend Guy Lafleur described as the best stick in the world, launched a line of carbon composites equipped with high-density foam-core blades that eliminate the rattle while improving puck-handling. Its new T-series composites are assembled in Sherbrooke, using blades made on site and shafts produced in China.



FILMAR SPORTSWEAR CANADA INC.
Montreal

This hat specialist, known to the public for its Bula brand, traces its roots to the knit tubes that construction workers wear under their hard hats in winter. In the 1970s, Phillip Marcovitch realized that these utilitarian items could be fashioned into a product he called the "Ski Tube." It became a bestseller in Canadian pro shops and sports stores, and the firm now sells into the U.S., Europe and Asia. As Filmar expanded, Marcovitch—by this time joined by his brother Leonard—bought a Montreal garment factory and invested heavily in high-tech knitting machines that enhanced productivity. Thus the firm kept its manufacturing in-house while producing a kaleidoscope of styles geared to the snowboarding set. As Leonard says, "The average individual doesn't just have one hat they wear for 10 years." Filmar, with 150 employees, has revenues in the \$30- to \$50-million range.